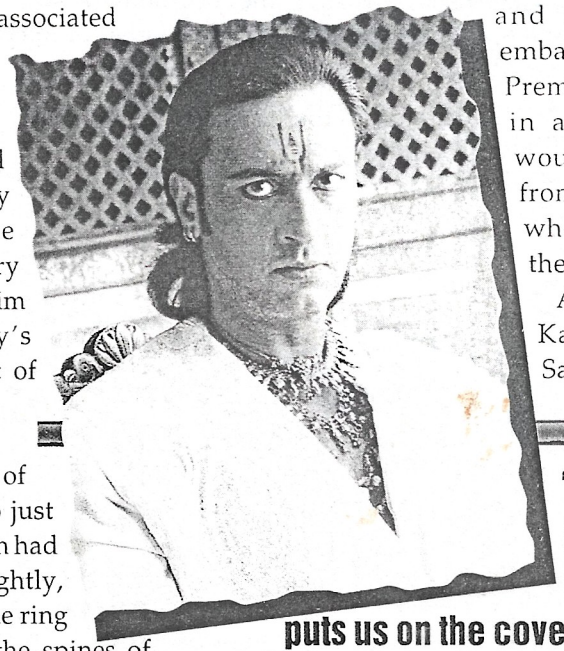
HAS IT COME OF AGE?

There is a well-known story about Pran — according to him, during his villainous heyday, nobody named their sons Pran, because the name was instantly and irrevocably associated with evil.

Considering that in those early innocent days of cinema, the villain was either a cruel zamindar, greedy moneylender or a fortune hunter who wanted to marry the rich heroine, making him almost a saint by today's standards, it is to the credit of actors like Yakub, KN Singh and Pran that they managed to frighten the daylights out of the audiences. Yakub had to just leer into the camera, KN Singh had just to raise his eyebrow slightly, and Pran had to blow a smoke ring for a shiver to pass down the spines of audiences in the darkened cinema hall.



It took Pran films like *Upkaar* and later *Zanjeer* to completely wipe out his years of wickedness in films and change over to playing good character parts. In many films afterwards, audiences were certain he was just pretending to be nice, and would do something horrid as soon as they let down their guard. However, one still doesn't hear of too many male children in India being named Pran. The image of that malevolent look is too tough to erase.

Interesting little anecdotes spilled out when Prem Chopra and Gulshan Grover were invited by the British Council (Mumbai) to talk about villainy in Hindi cinema.

Chopra, who has had a very long career as a baddie, recalled how he accepted a villain's role with great reluctance, only when his career as a hero didn't take off. For many years, he didn't let his daughters watch his films for fear of what they would think of him. Right from childhood they were made to understand that his was a job like any other, and nothing to be ashamed of. Even so, when his daughter proudly took her friends to a trial of his film, and there he was pillaging and raping, she was most embarrassed. For many years, Prem Chopra's social life was in a mess because people would quite literally shy away from being seen with a man who did such awful things in the movies.

Almost all villains — Kanhaiyalal, Madan Puri, Sajjan, Rehman, Jeevan and others — used to be constantly apologising to irate audiences who mixed up the reel life with the real, and believed bad man on screen must be bad in real life too.

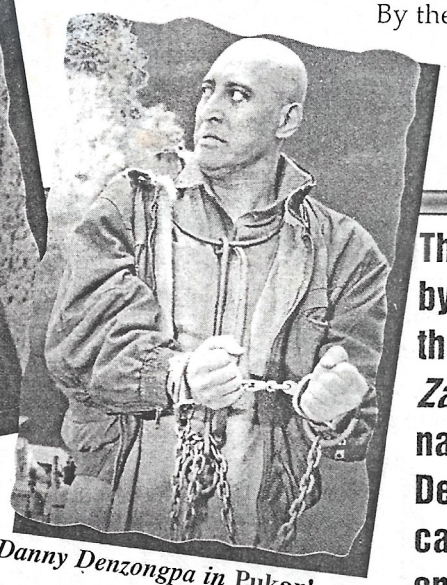
"No heroine flaunts her affair with a villain. No magazine puts us on the cover and no product uses a villain as a model. Are we so bad?" — Gulshan Grover

Gulshan Grover claimed he always wanted to be a villain because bad men got to play a greater variety of roles and their careers didnt depend on a fickle box-office. He admitted that he sometimes wondered if he should have tried to make a go as a hero. He also forbade his son from seeing his films, lest the child be upset by the sight of his dad getting a bashing from the hero. His mother was so distressed when she saw him doing his vile stuff on screen that she was afraid to face her acquaintances when she went to the temple, so she

actually begged him to give up and return home!

Grover related an incident when he had to fly out urgently and there was no seat in the aircraft but the one reserved for crew. The flight was delayed indefinitely because a tearful airhostess refused to sit next to a villain. She went so far as to say that she would quit her job, but she wouldn't share a seat with Grover. Finally, after much pacifying she boarded the flight and spent the next hour glaring at him. "I had to sit there cowering, and try not to touch her even accidentally," he said.

Amjad Khan in Sholay!



Danny Denzongpa in Pukar!

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"When girls go to the heroes' rooms to take autographs they go alone. But when they go to meet a villain, they take along a burly escort, as if the poor actor will jump on a girl the moment he sets eyes on her. No heroine flaunts her affair with a villain. No magazine puts us on the cover and no product uses a villain as a model. Are we so bad?" he grumbled. "And whenever there's a meaty negative role going, you can be sure a hero will grab it and win an award for it."

But somewhere down the line, evil in society around us overtook evil in films. By the seventies, neither Birju of *Mother India* nor Ganga of *Ganga Jumna* — both bandits — would be considered bad. Today's audiences, quite used to their heroes being murderers, gangsters and psychopaths, would consider an outlaw (who turned that way because of the atrocities committed against him) quite tame in comparison. Far from being frightened of villains, our audiences started getting dazzled by their aura of strength and power.

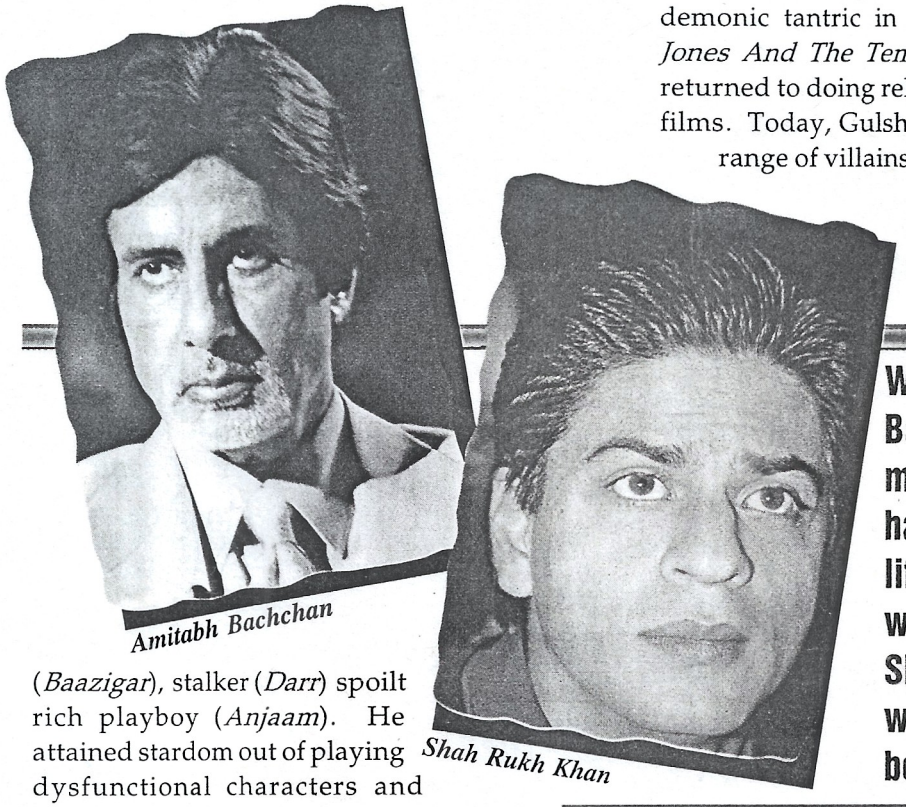
Perhaps it was Amitabh Bachchan playing a smuggler in *Deewar* with his head held high, or the cool menace exuded by Gabbar Singh in *Sholay*; the stylishness of Ajit in *Zanjeer*, the pure nastiness of Danny Denzongpa in *Dhund*, or the suavity of Shatrughan Sinha in *Rampur Ka Lakshman* that caused the villain to take on heroic dimensions. Raj Babbar who played a vicious rapist in *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* was quite amazed to receive tons of fan mail from women. (This was nothing, considering educated women from respectable families were practically queuing up to marry Charles Shobhraj when he was lodged in Tihar jail!)

By the time Mogambo (Amrish Puri) of *Mr India* rolled in, Hindi film audiences had decided that they rather liked such funky, garishly dressed bad guys with oddball ambitions of taking over the world. And when Rama Shetty (Sadashiv Amrapurkar), the jovial, pragmatic and powerful don made his appearance in *Ardh Satya*, audiences were almost rooting for him over the upright hero (Om Puri) wracked with self-doubt.

By the nineties, there were more real life villains than films could ever keep pace with — corrupt politicians (Laloo Prasad Yadav is such a prototype), sadistic cops (does anything a cop do in a film match the barbarity of the Bhagalpur blindings?), remorseless rapists, psychopaths, gangsters, terrorists and mass murderers. Would films even dare to replicate scenes of carnage in Kashmir, Assam, Punjab and Bihar? They took recourse in creating the comical villain. Kader Khan, Shakti Kapoor, Anupam Kher, Paresh Rawal et al took the menace off some of the characters

they played, by giving them funny get-ups, quirks or catch phrases. They seemed to say, we are bad, but don't take us too seriously, people; there are others out there in the real world, who are far worse — keep a look out for them.

Vinod Khanna has been one of the very few villains who made a smooth transition to playing leading man. But it was Shah Rukh Khan who brought respectability to the psychopath (*Baazigar*), stalker (*Darr*) spoilt rich playboy (*Anjaam*). He attained stardom out of playing dysfunctional characters and imparting to them such an air of injured pride that audiences actually applauded when he threw Shilpa Shetty to her death in *Baazigar*, or terrified Juhi Chawla out of her mind in *Darr*. They didn't hate this guy, they weren't afraid of him, they turned him into the biggest star of his generation. When Amitabh Bachchan had played a man scorned playing havoc with his rival's life in *Parwana*, it was with a sense of apology, Shah Rukh's characters were almost proud of being evil. So much so that all heroes thought it was a kind of status symbol to play one negative role at least once in their careers.



Amitabh Bachchan

Shah Rukh Khan

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Sunny Deol played one in *Jeet*, Bobby in *Bichhoo* and *Badal*. Sunil Shetty was actually keen on playing negative characters in *Hu Tu Tu* and *Dhadkan*. Govinda was quite happy with his *Shikari* role (mentally unbalanced killer) till the film bombed. Jackie Shroff played completely black characters in *Mission Kashmir* and *Farz* and almost resurrected his sagging career.

Sanjay Dutt played a series of criminals and sociopaths—*Jung, Kartoos, Khauff, Baaghi, Vaastav* (for which he won best actor awards) and is still considered a hero. Nana Patekar played characters with a loony edge in *Parinda, Agnisakshi, Krantiveer, Ghulam-E-Mustafa, Wajood* with no appreciable decrease in his popularity.

Many years ago Amrish Puri had portrayed a demonic tantric in Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom*, and quickly returned to doing relatively safer villains in Hindi films. Today, Gulshan Grover, who has played a range of villains here, is one of the few Indian actors (besides Om Puri) who is getting offers from international filmmakers.

Grover can no longer crib that villains don't get media attention when he himself gets a fair share. Manoj Bajpai played a gangster in *Satya* and became a star. Ashutosh Rana played a serial killer in *Dushman* and *Sanghursh* and is written about a hell of a lot. Rahul Dev, model-turned-baddie, got more media space than the hero (Sunny Deol) of *Champion*.

The line between the hero and villain seems to be getting increasingly blurred. The characters they portray may or may not have shades of grey, but the public has no problems accepting evil on screen or the actors who represent it. There is so much blood-and-gore in real life and so much mayhem pouring into the drawing room through television, that even kids are not afraid of evil any longer. Mogambo would surely be quite *khush* now that he is this close to taking over the world.

—Deepa Gahlot